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TAGS: [JM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: JAMAICA LABOR PARTY: FROM THE WILDERNESS TO THE
PROMISED LAND?

REF: A. KINGSTON 00253

[B](#). KINGSTON 00420
[C](#). KINGSTON 00640

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[1](#)1. (U) Summary: The Jamaica Labor Party on February 21 held its annual conference, which had been postponed twice since September 2004 due to Hurricane Ivan and internal disputes. The meeting officially elected Bruce Golding, who ultimately ran unopposed, to the position of party leader. The event also launched a new era for the JLP as it closed the chapter on 30 years of leadership by Edward Seaga. What emerged was a JLP that is touting a new vision and a unified image as it prepares to challenge the People's National Party (PNP) in the country's upcoming general election. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (U) On February 21, the Jamaica Labor Party (JLP) held its twice-postponed annual conference at the National Arena in Kingston. The conference, shortened to one day from two, had as its primary agenda item the election of Senator Bruce Golding to the party leadership position vacated by long time party leader and former prime minister Edward Seaga. After a one-month leadership gap caused by Seaga's resignation, and with the internal strife of a bitter leadership contest behind them (Ref A), the JLP touted the conference as the beginning of "new leadership" with a "new vision." Eager to move forward, the JLP sought to repair its fractured public image and usher in an era of unity and progress.

[1](#)3. (U) With the election of Golding and the completion of other protocolary issues completed by midday, the JLP welcomed thousands of supporters into the National Arena for the afternoon's public session. Within an hour, there was standing room only inside the arena, which took on a festival-like atmosphere as the building filled with cigarette and ganja smoke, loud dancehall music, and enthusiastic JLP constituents, many arriving with beer bottles in hand.

[1](#)4. (U) For several hours, the crowd heard energetic speeches from the JLP leadership, including each of the party's four deputy leaders (Derrick Smith, James Robertson, Audley Shaw, and Horace Chang). Without fail, each speaker railed against the People's National Party (PNP) government for all of Jamaica's ills, including failing public services, the high and rising crime rate, a poor educational system, a weak economy and rising unemployment, high indebtedness, and government corruption. Smith lamented 16 years of "hell" under an "uncommitted" PNP government, calling for additional resources to support the security forces. Interim Opposition Leader Ken Baugh described Jamaica's disastrous situation in the wake of the PNP's leadership as "ground zero." James Robertson cited the party's disunited public image as the primary reason that it was not in power today. Chang bemoaned that the JLP has been "down in the valley a very long time," and that it was time to move "from the wilderness to the promised land." Shaw questioned where the government was spending its money, demanding accountability for the allocation of foreign aid and provoking the cheering crowd with the question, "Where has all the hurricane relief money gone? To service debt?"

[1](#)5. (U) In a show of party unity, the afternoon's agenda included a "special presentation" by former party leadership candidate Pearnel Charles, who was almost singlehandedly responsible for delaying the JLP's originally scheduled conference when he took the party to court in November 2004. Charles called for unity despite previous "misunderstandings," and characterized the current government as "upside down," citing what he termed its recent attempt to undermine the fundamental rights of Jamaicans by trying to adopt the Caribbean Court of Justice without a referendum (Ref B).

[1](#)6. (U) During an address by Ruddy Spencer, president of the JLP-affiliated Bustamante Industrial Trade Union, Golding made his much anticipated entry into the arena in his first

public appearance as party leader. The cheers rose to a fever pitch as Golding struggled through the crowd to take his place on the platform. Chants of "Destiny!" continued for at least 15 minutes before order was restored and the program was allowed to carry on. That is, until former leader Seaga unexpectedly entered the arena less than 30 minutes later. Seaga, who had vowed publicly to boycott the event, took the stage amid screaming and hysterical cheers from the audience. The scene verged on chaos as people strained desperately to see or touch Seaga as he moved through the crowd. Event security could not prevent dozens of people from breaching barricades and pouring onto the stage along with Seaga. When the euphoria and music subsided, Seaga's remarks were brief and earnest, as he explained that he was "here for the last time" to "show respect for his boss," the delegates of the JLP. In a thinly veiled swipe at Golding and his backers, Seaga added that if there were one thing he had learned during his career, it was that "you must show respect to your boss." He continued by encouraging the party to be vigilant and strong, and to strive for quality education, equality in justice, and opportunity for all.

17. (U) With the event running an hour behind schedule, organizers skipped a planned special film presentation and welcomed Golding to the stage. In his remarks, which continued for approximately an hour, he outlined his plan for the country and stressed the government's shortcomings under the prime minister's leadership to the refrain of "We are tired of excuses, Mr. Patterson." Golding announced to Jamaicans at home and around the world that "recent difficult times and unpleasant episodes" were now in the past. Focusing primarily on the inequalities of class divisions in the country, Golding outlined his vision for "two Jamaicas to become one," and for all citizens to share the same values. He proclaimed that no one in Jamaica has to be poor, calling for quality education and good jobs for all. In addressing safety and security, he encouraged Jamaicans to protect each other "by instinct and by choice," calling for a government that respects justice and the rights of all its citizens. He continued that the government must serve and protect its citizens to earn their trust. Golding went on to criticize the PNP for missing an opportunity to do "so much good" during the economic boom of the 1990s, when he claimed that other Caribbean countries grew up to four times faster than Jamaica. The leader proposed a simultaneous bottom-up and top-down investment strategy to initiate a locally driven burst of economic activity.

18. (SBU) Comment: There has been much speculation, particularly in the media, about Seaga's well-choreographed entrance into the National Arena less than half an hour after Golding's public debut as party leader. Most, including some senior JLP officials, find it difficult to believe that the event was anything less than a mission to undermine the new leader's authority and to steal the show from the "new leadership." (Ref C). That theory is certainly supported by Seaga's "respect your boss" remarks, which were clearly directed at party reformists whom he has in the past heatedly accused of disrespecting him. Nevertheless, the conference was widely seen as a success, and JLP members are pleased with the party's new direction, particularly in contrast to the internal wranglings and ugly public disputes of 2004. Some senior party officials have gone so far as to say that they are ready today for a general election, although they would prefer an additional six months of preparation to position Golding to take back the government and lead the JLP to the promised land. End Comment.

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